



General Assembly

Distr.: General
8 September 2008

Original: English

Sixty-second session

Agenda item 121

Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Report of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly



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I. Introduction

1. By its resolution 61/292, the General Assembly decided to establish an ad hoc working group open to all Member States to:
 - (a) Evaluate and assess the status of implementation of relevant resolutions;
 - (b) Identify ways to further enhance the role, authority, effectiveness and efficiency of the Assembly, inter alia, by building on previous resolutions, and to submit a report thereon to the Assembly.
2. The present report and the recommendations contained herein are submitted pursuant to that resolution.
3. During the sixty-second session of the General Assembly, on 26 November 2007, the President of the General Assembly appointed two chairmen, Ambassador Eladio Loizaga, Permanent Representative of Paraguay to the United Nations, and Ambassador Andrzej Towpik, Permanent Representative of Poland to the United Nations, of the Working Group.
4. Before formally beginning its work, the co-chairs of the Working Group conducted informal meetings with various Member States and representatives of different political groupings. During those meetings the co-chairs benefited extensively from the insights and ideas of Member States on both the substance and the technical and procedural aspects of the revitalization process.

II. Proceedings

5. The Working Group held 7 meetings on 21 February, 30 May, 19 and 24 June, 21 and 31 July and 11 September 2008.
6. The programme of work was organized in three practical stages: (a) general discussion and exchange of views on all issues related to revitalization; (b) general discussion on the status of implementation of relevant General Assembly resolutions on revitalization; and (c) detailed analysis of the status of implementation, based on the inventory/chart (see para. 10 below). At each of those stages, delegates identified ways to further enhance the role, authority, effectiveness and efficiency of the General Assembly.

General debate on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

7. At its 1st meeting, on 21 February, the Working Group held a general discussion on the revitalization of the General Assembly. The background document before the Group was the report of the Secretary-General (A/62/608).¹
8. During the discussion, delegations touched upon many pertinent problems, including relations between the main organs of the United Nations (particularly between the General Assembly and the Security Council), the timely issuance of reports, the importance of thematic debates, the visibility of the Assembly and the role of the President of the General Assembly. In each instance, an effective and fair assessment of the status of implementation was identified as vital to further progress in revitalization.

¹ Several delegations expressed their disappointment over late issuance of the report.

9. Member States supported the approach adopted by the co-chairs of focusing on the assessment of implementation of past General Assembly resolutions on revitalization. Consequently, the co-chairs offered to prepare and present the Working Group with a synopsis of all resolutions on revitalization in order to indicate where and by whom the implementation of decisions was still required and to streamline and further facilitate the process. The synopsis would be based on the information contained in the relevant reports of the Secretary-General and comments by Member States.

General discussion on the status of implementation

10. In a letter dated 9 May, the co-chairs circulated an inventory/chart of all relevant provisions on revitalization starting from the fifty-first session of the General Assembly. The chart and the explanatory note have been posted on the website of the President of the General Assembly (<http://www.un.org/ga/president/62/issues/rga>).² To facilitate the assessment of relevant provisions, the chart defined the following three general clusters: Cluster I (working methods, documentation, agenda, etc.), Cluster II (selection of the Secretary-General) and Cluster III (role and authority of the General Assembly), which were subdivided into different thematic areas.

11. The chart was formally introduced by the co-chairs at the 2nd meeting of the Working Group on 30 May. In their introductory remarks, the co-chairs indicated that the chart was not definitive and might be amended at any time by Member States, if necessary, and that it was not intended to, nor did it have, any legal effect. It was solely meant to serve as a mechanism to facilitate the discussion and to indicate where implementation or additional clarification might still be needed.

12. The chart was welcomed by all delegations as an important and useful tool to assess the status of implementation and to identify ways to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the General Assembly.

13. During the review that followed, Member States underlined that the best way to revitalize the General Assembly was to ensure implementation of previous resolutions on the matter. At the same time, it was indicated that a large number of provisions on revitalization had already been implemented in a satisfactory manner. Some delegations noted, in this context, that in order to make a fair assessment of the progress achieved so far, a parallel should be drawn between the quantity of provisions implemented and their quality. Some argued that it was important to analyse the reasons for the lack of implementation of resolutions before engaging in the identification of ways to strengthen the Assembly. Some delegations suggested that the Secretary-General should present information on a number of mandates adopted within a given year in his annual reports, including their implementation status. In that context, a recommendation was made that the Secretary-General should continue to report on the implementation of resolutions on revitalization, taking the chart devised by the co-chairs as a model. One delegation proposed that the Working Group should prepare a document compiling selected provisions contained in the chart that continue to be relevant to the day-to-day conduct of business of the Assembly and annex it to the Assembly's rules of procedure.

² The chart and explanatory note will be issued in an addendum to the present report.

14. Delegations deplored late issuance of reports by the Secretariat, including the late issuance of the report on revitalization. In that context, a suggestion was made by some delegates that the Secretariat should give the specific reasons for the delay in the issuance of reports. Delegations also underlined that in order to make the work of the General Assembly more action-oriented, reports could be streamlined, where possible, and documentation reduced.
15. The current practice of briefings by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly and the organization of thematic debates by the President of the General Assembly were broadly supported. Some delegations indicated the need to assess thematic debates in respect to their outcomes and follow-up. Others suggested that the structure of thematic debates could be reviewed in order to generate a more interactive format that promotes dialogue among Member States, leading to tangible progress. Delegations also stressed that the Secretary-General's briefings could be organized more frequently in a periodic manner.
16. Several delegations underlined that the General Assembly should continue to engage actively in priority areas, including peace and security, the new peacebuilding architecture, development and the Millennium Development Goals, and to discuss current issues of major relevance. Some delegations underlined the need for an analysis on how the ongoing considerations on Security Council reform, system-wide coherence and mandate review could contribute to revitalization.
17. Many delegations underscored the lack of balance among and between the principal organs and indicated that it was essential to re-establish the balance between the main bodies of the Organization, as set out in the Charter of the United Nations.
18. Many delegations noted that the provisions relating to the selection of the Secretary-General were the least implemented provisions of the overall revitalization efforts and expressed the opinion that the procedures for selection of the Secretary-General should be considered well before the start of the next selection process. In that context, some delegations recalled the importance of the relevant article of the Charter and the relevant General Assembly resolutions.
19. Comments were also made with regard to the General Committee, which, due to its limited membership, should act strictly within its remit, as indicated in the rules of procedure.
20. Member States indicated the need to improve the public visibility of the General Assembly, inter alia, through enhancing contacts with civil society and a more proactive approach by the Department of Public Information.
21. The importance of the application of modern technologies to the work of the General Assembly was underlined by Member States, taking into consideration the need to address the digital gap. Special emphasis was given to the question of optical scanners. The co-chairs recirculated the proposal by the Secretariat, prepared and distributed in May 2007, which included three options for a voting system. Some delegations indicated the need for a separate meeting during which an additional explanation could be provided by the Secretariat.
22. In conclusion, the Working Group agreed to the proposal of the co-chairs to conduct a cluster-by-cluster examination of the chart. Many delegations added that

the Working Group should focus on what is achievable with a view to helping the General Assembly exercise its full authority.

Detailed discussion on the status of implementation

23. At its 3rd and 4th meetings, on 19 and 24 June, the Working Group conducted a cluster-by-cluster examination of the chart, followed by comments and clarifications by representatives of the Secretariat concerning matters related to its mandate.

A. Cluster I

(working methods, documentation, agenda, etc.)

24. With respect to item 1 (consolidated version),³ delegations were informed that document A/520/Rev.17 had now been issued. With respect to item 2 (precedents and past practices), the Secretariat made the following clarification:

The Office of Legal Affairs has been working closely with the Department of Public Information on this issue. The Office has concluded the process of compiling precedents and past practice with respect to the rules and practices of the intergovernmental bodies of the Organization. The information gathered will be made available in the public domain shortly, following the translation of the document into all six official languages.

25. With respect to item 3 (meeting on time), several delegations emphasized the importance of implementing this provision. With respect to item 5, which was scheduled over two substantive periods, some delegations proposed to set this issue aside, having in mind the difficulty in practical implementation of the provision.

26. With respect to item 11 (optical scanners), the Working Group had before it a letter from the co-chairs dated 18 June transmitting a document entitled "General Assembly paper ballot voting proposals" prepared by the Secretariat in May 2007. A number of delegations expressed interest in detailed discussions either in a separate meeting of the Working Group or in the Fifth Committee in the context of the capital master plan, while others cautioned against re-opening the discussions on the capital master plan (see para. 21 above). The Secretariat commented as follows:

The renovation of the Conference Building will not be completed until 2011, and the General Assembly Building renovation will be completed in mid-2013. With technology systems, it is always wise to make design decisions as late as reasonably possible, as these industries change so quickly.

The voting systems for the conference swing space, the North Lawn Conference Building, will have a system integrated with the simultaneous interpretation system, but will be similar to the current functionality in that it will be a three-button voting system. The voting boards will not be a lighted system as in the existing buildings, but will use a projection screen method.

In the long term, the goal is also to have a voting system completely integrated with the simultaneous interpretation system. This would enable a

³ This instance and other brief descriptions of items are taken from the bolded texts in the chart, which is to be issued in an addendum to the present report.

smart card feature, if desired, that could apply to both systems. The existing voting displays would be retained.

The options described in the attached proposal dated 25 May 2007 could be taken into account as follows:

Option A: An optical scanning solution could be implemented if requested. This would be a stand-alone system, which may be preferable to some users;

Option B: A wireless system with a wireless touchpad has not been analysed or considered to date, as far as the Working Group has been informed. The issues to be resolved would be feasibility, maintenance, reliability and security;

Option C: A hardwired electronic voting system using a smart card could be implemented.

27. Advantages and disadvantages of the three options were discussed. In particular, it was indicated that option A would not bring about effective time savings, while options B and C seemed not to fully meet secrecy requirements. There was general agreement to revert to the issue at a later stage in the Fifth Committee.

28. With respect to item 17 (update of the note), several delegations asked why the note on the control and limitation of documentation (A/58/CRP.7) had not been updated by the Secretary-General. The Secretariat responded as follows:

A/58/CRP.7 was composed of a note and three annexes. The only element that could be updated is annex II, which is a complete list of consolidation proposals that covered all of the then existing reporting mandates. The other parts/annexes are drafting guidelines (annex I, "Further measures suggested for Economic and Social Council machinery", and annex III, "Drafting guidelines for reports not totally within the purview of the Secretariat").

Out of the 32 proposed consolidated reports listed in A/58/CRP.7, annex II, 27 have been issued which consolidated altogether 109 reports (see table below for details).

Summary of reports consolidated as proposed in A/58/CRP.7, annex II

Number of consolidated reports proposed: 32

Number of proposals implemented: 27

<i>Author department/office</i>	<i>Number of reports</i>	<i>Number of reporting mandates</i>	<i>Number of mandates covered in each consolidated report</i>
Department for Disarmament Affairs	3	9	2, 4, 3
Department of Economic and Social Affairs	6	13	3, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2
Department of Management	11	57	8, 7, 4, 6, 2, 2, 12, 3, 6, 2, 5
Department of Political	1	13	13

<i>Author department/office</i>	<i>Number of reports</i>	<i>Number of reporting mandates</i>	<i>Number of mandates covered in each consolidated report</i>
Affairs			
International Civil Service Commission	1	2	2
Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs	3	9	2, 5, 2
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights	1	2	2
Office of Internal Oversight Services	—	—	—
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime	—	—	—
United Nations Children's Fund	1	2	2
Total	27	109	109

As mandated in General Assembly resolution 33/56, the Secretariat will continue to "draw the attention of intergovernmental bodies to areas where duplication of documentation is likely to occur and/or where opportunities for integrating or consolidating documents that deal with related or similar themes might exist with a view to rationalizing documentation".

29. With respect to item 19 (number of reports requested to be rationalized), many delegations expressed the view that it would be technically impossible to consolidate reports that are considered in different organs, while another delegation stated that it favoured the consolidation of reports wherever possible.

30. With respect to item 21, delegations expressed concern about the late issuance of some reports, including ones on financing of peacekeeping operations submitted to the Fifth Committee, and asked the Secretariat for a detailed explanation on the compact that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had entered into with the Secretary-General. The Secretariat provided the following explanation:

It needs to be clarified at the beginning that there are three concepts in the management of pre-session documents: submission of documents by author departments to the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, which is the processing department; processing of documents by the Department; and issuance of documents to intergovernmental bodies for consideration.

The Secretariat has been strictly implementing the mandated 10-4-6 week rule for the submission/processing and issuance of pre-session documents (namely submission of documents 10 weeks before consideration, processing of documents within four weeks and issuance of documents six weeks before

consideration). As mandated by General Assembly resolution 47/202, a few intergovernmental bodies have opted for an 8-4-4 time frame in light of their operational requirements.

Since timely submission of documents, which is the responsibility of all author departments, is crucial to timely issuance, all Under-Secretaries-General over the past few years have been requested by the Secretary-General to include a performance measure on timely submission in their annual compact with him. Also, timely submission is expected to be included as an indicator of achievement for all budget programmes in 2010-2011 as part of the accountability system demanded by Member States.

It should be pointed out that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management is committed to the four-week turnaround of documents submitted on time and within the word limit, and has been close to 100 per cent in meeting that target. Late submission is therefore the primary, if not the only, reason for late issuance.

The benchmark percentage set for timely submission for all author departments is 90 per cent. It is believed that improvement in submission in this regard will result in more timely issuance of documents, as shown by the first five months of 2008, during which time a timely submission rate of 72 per cent and a timely issuance rate of 77 per cent was registered, as compared with 63 per cent and 70 per cent, respectively, during the same period of 2007.

31. At the 2nd meeting, one delegation forwarded the view that the number of documents was excessive and that it was difficult for the Member States to digest them effectively. The same delegation also mentioned that periodic briefings by the Secretary-General were a good practice, which he should be encouraged to continue.

32. With respect to items 34 to 43 (provisions related to the agenda of the General Assembly), many delegations expressed their desire for timely issuance of the annotated preliminary list of items to be included in the provisional agenda of each session of the General Assembly.

33. With respect to items 59 to 72 (provisions related to the General Committee), many delegations stated that the General Committee should not be permitted to take up functions beyond those specified in the rules of procedure of the General Assembly.

B. Cluster II

(selection of the Secretary-General)

34. A number of delegations expressed strong dissatisfaction that no provisions in Cluster II had been implemented and wondered whether the General Assembly should adopt another resolution on the subject. Other delegations responded that the mandate of the Working Group was to assess the status of the implementation of past resolutions rather than to discuss a new resolution on the selection of the Secretary-General. During the 2nd meeting of the Working Group, delegations took up item 5 (formal presentation of candidatures), and wondered why no formal meetings had taken place for candidates to present their views to Member States. At the same meeting, other delegations suggested that if this subject were to be

addressed by the Member States, it should be done either during the sixty-second or sixty-third sessions of the General Assembly, sufficiently prior to the expiration of the current term of the Secretary-General. Other delegations noted this proposal with interest. Some delegations recalled the importance of the relevant Article of the Charter and the relevant General Assembly resolutions.

C. Cluster III

(role and authority of the General Assembly)

35. With respect to items 4 to 7 (provisions related to the financial, logistic and technical support for the President of the General Assembly), differing views were expressed as to whether the provisions had been implemented sufficiently or not. A number of delegations pointed out that the budget allocated to the Office of the President of the General Assembly had not increased for some time. In addition, some Member States noted that there was a need to address the lack of institutional memory in the Office of the President of the General Assembly between different sessions. Some technical, financial and logistical aspects related to the practical functioning of the Office of the President, including the support provided by the Secretariat, need to be clarified.

36. With regard to the support provided by the Secretariat to the President of the General Assembly and his Office, the Secretariat made the following clarification concerning the current arrangements:

Summary of resources given to the Office of the President of the General Assembly

Resources come from several different sources:

Budget (Department for General Assembly and Conference Management)

In the report of the Secretary-General on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 (A/52/303 and Corr.1), a budget of \$250,000 was established for the Office. The budget, adjusted annually for inflation, is to be used for the reimbursement of all official travel, hospitality and incidental office expenses (currently approximately \$290,000).

Staffing (Department for General Assembly and Conference Management)

Recruited by the President of the General Assembly:

- 1 D-2 — Chef de Cabinet
- 1 D-2 — Deputy Chef de Cabinet
- 1 D-1 — Adviser
- 1 P-5 — Adviser
- 1 General Service (currently webmaster)

Supplied from within DGACM budget:

- 2 Professional-level staff

2 General Service staff

Travel (Department for General Assembly and Conference Management)

At the written invitation of, inter alia, a Government or international or regional organization, the President is entitled to reimbursement for travel and daily subsistence allowance for a party of three (including the President). Similar to the Secretary-General, the President is entitled to first class travel status.

Official vehicle (Department of Management)

The President is provided with a car and driver to be used for official purposes.

Security officers (Department of Safety and Security)

The President has a detail of two security officers on a routine basis, including during travel, in support of official functions.

Spokesperson (Department of Public Information)

The President is entitled to select a Spokesperson for his/her term of Office.

37. With respect to items 11 to 18 (provisions related to the annual report of the Security Council), several delegations expressed their disappointment with what they saw as a lack of response by the Council, including the insufficient improvement of the quality of its annual report and the non-issuance of special subject-oriented reports to the General Assembly as envisaged in item 12. Many also stated that they did not agree with the note for item 12 that "the special subjects are to some extent covered by the monthly assessment". Some delegations, while acknowledging the need for further progress, recalled some ongoing improvements to the quality of the annual report of the Security Council.

38. With respect to items 22 to 25 (provisions related to the public relations activities), several delegations emphasized the importance of public relations efforts concerning the work of the General Assembly. In response to delegations' comments, the co-chairs stated that the content of specific public relations activities by the Secretariat should be discussed in the framework of the Committee on Information. Delegations asked why no assistant to the Spokesperson for the President of the General Assembly had been provided since January 2008. The Secretariat provided the following explanation:

The Department of Public Information considers it a priority every year to identify a suitable staff member who can provide excellent information support to the President of the General Assembly. Department staff members have been serving as Spokespersons for the President for many years.

Additional administrative support at the General Service level has never been part of this arrangement, and such support was only granted on an exceptional basis and for a limited time period. No post is available in the Department of Public Information to cover these functions, and the Department's Executive Office has been obliged to identify a series of temporarily vacant posts against which these functions could be charged on an

ad hoc basis. Such an arrangement was barely tenable during the limited time period for which it was granted, but has now, under even tighter budget conditions and with a mandated increase in the vacancy rate, become fully unsustainable.

The Department of Public Information finds itself unable to provide additional administrative support beyond the long-standing arrangement to cover the functions of a spokesperson for the President, which the Department is pleased to honour.

39. In response to the request regarding indicators showing the degree of improvement in the enhancements of public awareness over the work of the General Assembly and efforts to better publicize it, the Department of Public Information prepared information on its activities in this regard as well as the relevant decisions of the General Assembly.⁴

40. With respect to items 32 and 33 (provisions related to interactive/thematic debates), several delegations commended the President of the General Assembly for the practice of holding thematic debates, but many wondered to what extent views expressed by the Member States at those debates were reflected in subsequent decisions by the Member States and the Secretariat.

41. With respect to item 34 (inform Member States about outcomes), several delegations asked why no regular information had been presented to the Member States about the outcome of periodic meetings between the Presidents of the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council. The Secretariat read out the following explanation by the Office of the President of the General Assembly:

The President of the General Assembly meets the President of the Security Council every month to discuss the monthly programme of work and other matters. He also meets the President of the Economic and Social Council periodically, and their most recent discussions covered global food security and the election by their respective bodies of the members of the Peacebuilding Commission.

The President of the General Assembly reports the result to Member States in various formats, including through the General Committee and chairpersons of the regional groups.

III. Conclusions

42. In accordance with its mandate, the Working Group endeavoured to examine the status of implementation of relevant provisions related to revitalization and to identify the problems having the greatest impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of the General Assembly.

43. Apart from individual comments on specific subjects, many aspects of the revitalization process were investigated throughout the discussions, as reflected in the present report.

⁴ That information will be issued in an addendum to the present report.

44. It is the opinion of the Ad Hoc Working Group that the following elements appear to be common areas that require the additional attention of Member States:

(a) The process of implementation of relevant provisions on revitalization should be continued and carefully monitored, and practical proposals in that regard might include:

(i) Member States might wish to prepare a working paper compiling provisions on revitalization that continue to be relevant to the day-to-day conduct of business of the General Assembly,

(ii) The Secretary-General should continue to report on the implementation of resolutions on revitalization, taking the co-chairs' chart as a model;

(iii) The Secretary-General, in his annual report on the work of the organization, could present information on a number of mandates adopted within the year, including their implementation status;

(b) The question of modern technologies (including the General Assembly voting system) needs further consideration, and for that purpose:

(i) The Secretariat might update the document entitled "General Assembly paper ballot voting proposals" prepared in May 2007 or present other proposals, corresponding with arrangements made in the context of the capital master plan;

(ii) The financial aspects of proposals on changing the voting system should be clarified within the Fifth Committee and in the context of financial provisions for the capital master plan.

IV. Adoption of the report of the Ad Hoc Working Group

45. At its 7th meeting, on 11 September 2008, the Ad Hoc Working Group considered and adopted a draft resolution (see para. 46 below) and the present report for consideration by the General Assembly at its sixty-second session.

V. Recommendations

46. At its 7th meeting, on 11 September 2008, the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly concluded its work for the sixty-second session of the General Assembly. The Working Group decided to recommend to the General Assembly the adoption of the following draft resolution:

Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

The General Assembly,

Reaffirming its previous resolutions relating to the revitalization of its work, including resolutions: 46/77 of 12 December 1991, 47/223 of 17 August 1993, 48/264 of 29 July 1994, 51/241 of 31 July 1997, 52/163 of 15 December 1997, 55/14 of 3 November 2000, 55/285 of 7 September 2001, 56/509 of 8 July 2002, 57/300 of 20 December 2002, 57/301 of 13 March 2003, 58/126 of 19 December 2003, 58/316 of 1 July 2004, 59/313 of 12 September 2005, 60/286 of 8 September 2006 and 61/292 of 2 August 2007,

Stressing the importance of implementing resolutions in the revitalization of its work,

Recognizing the need to further enhance the role, authority, effectiveness and efficiency of the General Assembly,

1. *Takes note with appreciation* of the report of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly established by resolution 61/292;¹

2. *Decides* to establish, at its sixty-third session, an ad hoc working group on the revitalization of the General Assembly, open to all Member States, in order:

(a) To identify further ways to enhance the role, authority, effectiveness and efficiency of the Assembly, inter alia by building on previous resolutions;

(b) To submit a report thereon to the General Assembly at its sixty-third session.

¹ A/62/952.